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# Brief Essay on the Nature and Method of Epistemology[1]

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1 This is the unripe fruit of many years of reflection on epistemology. Some of the topics here have been more extensively treated in my previous works (the ones cited in *Bibliography*). This essay comes after considering other modern answers to the problem of knowledge (Kant's *Critique*, Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Heidegger's *Being and Time*) and other twentieth-century interpretations of Aquinas' epistemology (J. Maréchal, E. Gilson, K. Rahner, H. U. Von Balthasar, B. Lonergan, J. Owens, E. Stump). The main source of inspiration for this work is Aquinas' *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2. This essay attempts to explain briefly and Thomistically the nature and method of epistemology, an endeavor in which I am indebted to Fabro, Verneaux and Tavuzzi, at least to some extent. I thank Jacob Fluech, IVE for his careful copy editing.

1. Gnoseology[2] or epistemology is the study of knowledge. Now, knowledge is a dual phenomenon: knowing is a certain "possessing a perfection," in which "possessing," as a certain action, could be considered the subjective side, and the "perfection," as a certain act, could be considered the objective side. Thus, knowing the tree is possessing somehow the perfection of the tree; it is a way of "being the tree." Regarding knowledge, the particularity or aspect which is studied in gnoseology is the being of the object as object in the subject, that is, *the kind of being* which allows a certain perfection to be objectively possessed by a subject or, primarily at least, *the kind of being* allowing the subject to be objectively what it physically is not.[3]

2. Thus, the mystery to be explained by gnoseology is not directly knowledge as a human action: there is already a branch of philosophy studying human actions, which is anthropology. Gnoseology endeavors to explain knowledge as a way of being of the object in the subject, a way of being which is not physical (as is the perfection by which a being is what it is) but one which allows a being to be what it is not (or, also, to possess itself in a cognitive way).

3. Therefore, gnoseology is the study of a certain kind of being, not the study of an action: in other words, it is the study of an act, of the objective (or intentional) perfection of the subject, not directly the study of the action which has knowledge as its result. Knowledge is the being of the object in the subject, not an accident of a subject. I am not saying that we do not study knowing as an action in gnoseology, but that the reason we study this action in gnoseology is the explanation of the being of the object in the subject.

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2 Although the most common term for this scientific endeavor is "epistemology," I have always preferred to employ "gnoseology" as *perhaps* etymologically better suited. I do not consider this terminological question so relevant. Cf. Roger Verneaux, *Epistemología General* (Barcelona: Herder, 1994).

3 Cf. *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2, c.

4. Moreover, gnoseology is the study of *human* knowledge, not the study of divine or angelic knowledge. Divine knowledge is not accessible to philosophy, whereas angelic knowledge is only inferred from what we know about God and human beings regarding knowledge.

5. Gnoseology is realized fully in the study of *intellectual* human knowledge as, one could say, metaphysics is realized fully in the study of the finite separate substances. This is because all human knowledge has as its kernel intellectual knowledge: intelligence is the metaphysical reason and the metaphysical source of any other (sensible) knowledge. In other words, even if the notion of knowledge applies to every instance of human knowledge, intelligence is somehow present in all the rest as its metaphysical root. In a similar way, even if the notion of being applies to every finite being, the consideration of angels helps us to distinguish what belongs to every finite being as such from what belongs to a being because of its materiality.

6. We could try to organize gnoseology as a science following the pattern of resolutions and compositions that St. Thomas applies to metaphysics.[4] In every science, it seems, we go from the facts and from the particular to the universal and necessary, that is, to an understanding which allows us to explain the facts and reduce multiplicity to order and unity. This reduction or resolution, however, is not an end in itself, but rather it allows us to go back to all particulars (even those which have not been considered before) and understand them in a new light. This going back to the particulars is what Aquinas calls "composition." These two processes can happen with regard to real things and with regard to notions. Thus, gnoseology would observe the four instances of human reasoning as follows:

4 Cf. Andres Ayala, "Brief Essay on the Nature and Method of Metaphysics," *The Incarnate Word* 10, no. 1 (May 2023): 51–54, https : / / philpapers.org/rec/AYABEO. See *Appendix* at the end of this paper.

*a)* In resolution *secundum rem*, we proceed from human (intellectual) knowledge as a fact to its metaphysical condition of possibility, that is, to its efficient cause. Thus, we treat the problem of the universals ("How come we understand intellectually, in a universal way, the particular sensible reality?"), and we arrive at the agent intellect as the metaphysical condition of the possibility of human understanding. We consider sensible knowledge as part of the fact that we are trying to explain but do not yet stop at analyzing sensible knowledge.

*b)* In resolution *secundum rationem*, we proceed from the different notions of human knowledge (sensible and intellectual) to the one notion of knowledge as intentional possession of being. We also derive from this general notion the necessary characteristics of knowledge: immaterial, objective, by means of species, etc.

*c)* In composition *secundum rem*, we seek to discover the value of each kind of knowledge and the conditions of the possibility of their objectivity. Composition *secundum rem* is the moment of *critique* of knowledge, properly speaking, because each knowledge is now judged from the point of view of the notion of knowledge. Or, perhaps better said, seen in the light of the general notion of knowledge and of the necessary characteristics stemming from it, each particular knowledge is judged in its objectivity and truthfulness.

*d)* In composition *secundum rationem*, we reinterpret common gnoseological notions like truth, objectivity, evidence and error in the light of the notion of knowledge that is the result of resolution *secundum rationem*.

7. Another possibility for portraying gnoseology's method or path is to say that gnoseology, like mathematics, does not explain a real being and, therefore, has no reasoning *secundum rem*. However, this does not seem to be the case, for knowledge is a fact, not simply a formality and, therefore, can be explained in its efficient cause. Now, it could be argued that the end of resolution *secundum rem* should be God as light

rather than being the agent intellect: but, while this reduction to the ultimate cause is perfectly legitimate and Thomistic (the agent intellect is a light participated from God's light), one could argue that this reduction belongs to metaphysics rather than to gnoseology. Finally, is not the end of gnoseology's resolution *secundum rem* actually achieved by anthropology? It does seem so, and we will use in this part of gnoseology many of Aquinas' arguments from his treatise on the human being. That being said, gnoseology's general approach seems different, and, in any case, something similar happens in metaphysics: that is, also in metaphysics, one could argue that the end of resolution *secundum rem* is demonstrated in physics also (i.e., the existence of God as first motor can be demonstrated in natural philosophy as well).

8. The following few questions and propositions may help to understand the gnoseological project as previously exposed.

*a)* **Why do we study gnoseology?** We want to make the fact of knowledge intelligible, and that is why we need to understand first what, properly speaking, constitutes knowledge (its definition) and, second, apply this definition and its consequences to the fact.

*b)* Thus, **the reason for each part of gnoseology** becomes clearer. At first, we go from the fact of knowledge to an understanding of the same by its efficient cause (in resolution *secundum rem*). Second, we try to define the fact through the most general notion (in resolution *secundum rationem*). Third, we apply this notion to the facts (in composition *secundum rem*). Fourth, we refine our notions (in composition *secundum rationem*). The compositions are intended to give us a sapiential and unitary vision of the facts (composition *secundum rem*) and of the epistemological notions (composition *secundum rationem*) in the light of the notion of knowledge that is the fruit of the resolution *secundum rationem*.

*c)* **What are the topics of each part**? In resolution *secundum rem*, we go from the problem of the universals as a fact to its solution in the theory of the agent intellect with the

two meanings of intelligible. In resolution *secundum rationem*, we focus on *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2 and define knowledge as the intentional presence of a being in the knower. Certain general characteristics of all knowledge such as immateriality, objectivity and infallibility (the fallibility of judgment being studied later) appear rightly treated here, as well as the notions of species *impressa* and *expressa*. Subsequently, composition *secundum rem* is the moment of applying to sensibility and intelligence the notions of knowing and objectivity, trying to make a judgment of value (a "critique") regarding each instance of human knowing. At this stage of gnoseology, the psychological process of human knowing is seen with an aim to justify its objectivity. Finally, in composition *secundum rationem*, the notions of truth, certitude, evidence, error, etc. are considered in the light of the notions of knowledge and objectivity.

9. What is the relationship between metaphysics and gnoseology? Are they truly different sciences? It appears so. Both have to do with participation: metaphysics refers to the subjective participation of the act of being, whereas gnoseology refers to the objective participation of any perfection. The object of metaphysics is *ens* as that which in a finite way participates *esse*. The object of gnoseology is being as objectively participated in a subject. Metaphysics refers to what makes a being to be itself, whereas gnoseology refers to what makes a being to be the other (originally) or, in general, what makes a being (the knower) to be its object (be it itself or another thing) as such (as object).

10. Could one participation be reduced to the other? If this were the case, it would seem clear that the gnoseological participation should be reduced to the metaphysical one and not vice versa. That being said, given that intentional being is a finite participation of a certain actuality (the subject participates objectively the perfection of something), it could be granted that this participation is also a certain participation of *esse,* provided that the notion of *ens* and *esse* are extended to

this new way of being perfect. This extension, provided it does not take away the specificity of intentional being, would make gnoseology a sub-branch of metaphysics, whereas, if this way of being were reduced to an accidental or qualitative way of being, gnoseology would be destroyed.

11. Another possibility is to maintain that the two kinds of being, metaphysical and intentional, are irreducible but that gnoseology is still a metaphysical reflection, that is, a coming back to knowledge once metaphysics has come to know being. If this were the case, this "coming back" would not mean a search for the foundations of metaphysics, as if knowing knowledge were the foundation of knowing being, but a coming back to a fact, the fact that we have known being. Moreover, this "coming back" would not imply having finished the metaphysical path, but only having known being. However, and against this possibility, if the two kinds of being are irreducible, then we have two distinct formal objects, and this would favour the distinction of sciences. Saying "metaphysical" reflection could sound as if the method were the same, but one could argue that, here, "metaphysical" means no more than "philosophical," that is, a study of something according to its first causes and principles.

12. How can we say that intentional being is not a metaphysical being? The real problem we face is that created reality is complex and, more precisely, dual, and we human beings will not succeed in reducing created reality to one category just because we think this is the way to understand *things* … Better said: understanding things *as such* is understanding them as participating *esse*; but understanding things *as understood* is different. Created reality is complex because there is created knowing in reality. As Aquinas said, "a thing can be perfect in two ways …"

13. One should remember that Kant's problem, in a way, was trying to understand knowledge as a physical kind of being, that is, as a compound of matter and form. Kant's only way to conceive identity was physical, in such a way that, if an

object was allowed to be one with a subject, this had to be explained as the unity of matter and form, as two aspects of the same being. Understanding knowledge as an accident or a quality of the subject is repeating the same mistake: understanding knowledge as the unity of one and the same thing with itself, and not with the other. Instead, we should understand knowledge as Aquinas did: as the unity of one thing with another thing, as a communion, as an encounter, as the second mode of being of *De Veritate*, q. 2, a. 2, according to which one thing can be present in the other or, better said, *to* the other. How this is possible is a good question, but *that* this is possible is a fact … or one has not yet gotten out of bed. Life is not a dream; it's happening out there.

## APPENDIX: THE FOUR INSTANCES OF SCIENTIFIC REASONING[5]

Scientific reasoning, for Aquinas, is instantiated in four types. Because metaphysics is a science, those four types are found in metaphysics.[6] What are these four instances of scientific reasoning? They comprise two kinds of resolution and two kinds of composition. Let us explain, first, what resolution and composition mean and, second, the kinds of resolution and composition.[7]

Resolution is like finding the one through the many; it is a reasoning process which departs from the many and finds in the end a unity that explains or grounds the many. Resolution finishes in the understanding of a unity. Resolution is not only a process but includes also the end of that process. Resolution finishes in an understanding of a certain "oneness," but an

5 Excerpt from Ayala, "Brief Essay on the Nature and Method of Metaphysics," 51–54.

6 However, not all four types need to be found in all sciences. In mathematics, for example, there is no reasoning *secundum rem*.

7 Cf. *In Booethii De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, *Ad tertiam questionem*. Cf. also Michael Tavuzzi, "Aquinas on Resolution in Metaphysics," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no. 2 (April 1991): 199–227.

understanding of this oneness "through the many": that is, we depart from the many, and, reasoning through them, we arrive at understanding this "oneness."

Science, however, does not finish in the contemplation of the one, but rather in the contemplation of the many as in a certain sense one. We really "know" something when we can see it in a unifying vision. We really know "reality" when we can contemplate it with a unifying vision. Reality is multiple and we must somehow "explain" it, make sense of it: to make sense is to find unity in the many.

Science, therefore, continues with a process of "composition." Composition is the re-interpretation of the many in the light of the "oneness" that we have discovered in resolution. Composition is coming back to the many and seeing the many in the light of the principle we have discovered in resolution. Composition allows us to discover in the many those things that must necessarily be so, in the light of that which has been discovered in resolution. Thus, composition gives us not simply "understanding" but "wisdom," a sapiential vision of reality.

It is interesting to note that, in resolution, we see (or understand) the one *through the many*, whereas, in composition, we see (or understand) the many *through the one*. This composition is the unifying vision we want to achieve in metaphysics. Metaphysics does not finish in resolution (arriving at the one) but in composition (referring the many to the one).

In speculative sciences, according to St. Thomas, resolution and composition can be of two kinds: *secundum rem* (with regard to real things) and *secundum rationem* (with regard to true notions). Thus, resolution *secundum rem* will be to find the one thing which is the principle of the many. Resolution *secundum rationem* will be to find the one notion which ultimately explains or defines the many notions or, perhaps better said, the notion to which all other notions are ultimately reduced in some sense. Composition *secundum rem*

will be to reinterpret the many things in the light of a certain unity we have discovered (i.e., the real cause), and composition *secundum rationem* will be to reinterpret the many notions in the light of a certain unity (i.e., the notion of the science's formal object).

If these four types of reasoning were found in one science, it would seem that whatever is *secundum rem* must be previous to that which is *secundum rationem*: because whatever is in the mind (true notions) must come from the sensible reality which we know first (real things). Moreover, since human knowledge begins from the many, each type of scientific resolution appears to come necessarily before its corresponding scientific composition. In fact, composition is reinterpretation of the many in light of the one that has been discovered in resolution and, therefore, each resolution is necessarily previous to its corresponding composition.

A beautiful text from Aquinas may help us to see another aspect of resolution and composition:

> In every inquiry one must begin from some principle. And if this principle precedes both in knowledge and in being, the process is not resolutive, but compositive: because to proceed from cause to effect is to proceed in a compositive way, since causes are more simple than effects. But if that which precedes in knowledge is later in the order of being, the process is one of resolution, as when our judgment deals with effects, which by resolution we trace to their simple causes.[8]

8 ST I-II q. 14 a. 5, c. in Jesús Villagrasa, "La Resolutio Come Metodo Della Metafisica Secondo Cornelio Fabro," *Alpha Omega* 4, no. 1 (2001): 49: "In omni inquisitione oportet incipere ab aliquo principio. Quod quidem si, sicut est prius in cognitione, ita etiam sit prius in esse, non est processus resolutorius, sed magis compositivus, procedere enim a causis in effectus, est processus compositivus, nam causae sunt simpliciores effectibus. Si autem id quod est prius in cognitione, sit posterius in esse, est processus resolutorius, utpote cum de effectibus manifestis iudicamus, resolvendo in causas simplices."

St. Thomas is speaking explicitly of resolution and composition *secundum rem*, because he is referring to reasoning regarding extrinsic causality. However, something similar could be said regarding resolution and composition *secundum rationem*. When the notions from which one departs are not the most universal, the reasoning process is one of resolution, whereas when the notion from which one departs is most universal, the process is one of composition. As may be seen, there is a correspondence between the cause's priority in being and the notion's priority in universality: as the more universal notion is more abstract, so also the cause is more separated from matter. Moreover, as the most abstract notion is first in universality but is known last by human beings, the first cause is first in perfection but known last by human beings.

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